

November 27, 2005

Script for *Fabulous Furry Tales* podcast #4

Welcome to *Altivo's Fabulous Furry Tales*, a discussion of furry literature and related arts, presented every week or two. I'm your host, Altivo, the Clydesdale librarian, and I apologize for the little hiatus this last month while I dealt with some other aspects of furry fandom, most particularly my own attendance at Midwest FurFest here in Illinois.

This week's introductory excerpt is taken from Jethro Tull's 1978 album, *Heavy Horses* and is entitled "One Brown Mouse." For anyone who enjoys classic British rock, I think Jethro Tull is a must. And for the furry fan, I particularly recommend that album, and the one that immediately preceded it in 1977, *Songs from the Wood*.

The idea of having a mouse to tea seems particularly appropriate to today's topic:

Beatrix Potter and The Tailor of Gloucester

I imagine most of us have at least been exposed to the works of Beatrix Potter, who was born in 1866 but did not embark upon her publishing career in animal stories until the beginning of the 20th century. Her first and perhaps the best-known of her 23 books was *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* which appeared in 1902. This was followed almost immediately by *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* and then *The Tailor of Gloucester*, both of which were published in 1903.

Like Kenneth Grahame, Potter began creating her characters and stories as amusements for her younger relations and the children of friends. She was also like Grahame in that she had lived a relatively isolated and unusual life. Her parents were educated and lived largely off inherited money. They felt it inappropriate for a young girl to pursue academic interests, and tried to steer her into activities considered appropriately "ladylike," such as painting, drawing, entertaining, and fashion. By her late teens, Beatrix was forced to act as housekeeper and manager for the family home, supervising the servants who did the actual work and planning the entertainments her mother insisted on holding.

In spite of her mother's disapproval, however, she continued to keep many small pets, often right in the house. And, encouraged by an uncle, she pursued book studies in natural history and botany, applying her detailed artistic skills to elaborate illustrations of plants and fungi. Beatrix Potter was one of the first, perhaps the first ever, to recognize the fact that lichens are made up of a symbiosis between a fungus and an algae. She wrote a paper on the subject which was

presented at a scientific meeting by her uncle (since women were not permitted to attend) but was also rejected, largely on the basis that no woman could possibly have anything important to say about science. She continued her studies, however, and also made major discoveries about the life cycle of mosses and ferns, which were similarly ignored by the scientific establishment. Her uncle attempted to get her admitted as a student at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, but she was rejected on account of her gender. Those were the days when women were still denied the vote, and subject to disapproval for speaking in public.

Potter's books are often criticized for belonging to the genre sometimes called "rabbits in waistcoats," because they feature characters who look like animals but wear clothing and live in tiny houses. Stereotypical casting of foxes, cats, and weasels as villains, and mice, squirrels, and rabbits as the protagonists is also typical of these works. However, some of Potter's stories do not follow those patterns. Most notable among these are *The Tailor of Gloucester* and *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan* (which was published in 1905.) In fact, the protagonists in the latter book are a tabby cat and a terrier, and the villains, inasmuch as there can be said to be any, are various birds.

I consider *The Tailor of Gloucester* to be Potter's masterwork of animal storytelling. Though several others of her books are nearly as good, this one work stands out in several respects. It involves a human character as the chief protagonist, though he takes little part in the action, being sick in bed through most of the story. It depicts a cat as a potential villain as well as possible hero, accurately placing that cat, who is named Simpkin, in the context of his position in animal and human society respectively. And, certainly not the least of its merits, the story treats gratitude and generosity as moral goods but not something to be taken for granted, and does so without the heavy-handed moralizing so common in children's tales.

Potter nearly always cast mice as busy and frugal little creatures, orderly and proper in every respect (the major exception being in *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*) so it is probably no surprise that they would have treated the tailor so honorably, as she described him this way near the beginning of the book:

"All day long while the light lasted he sewed and snippeted, piecing out his satin, and pompadour, and lutestring; stuffs had strange names, and were very expensive in the days of the Tailor of Gloucester.

"But although he sewed fine silk for his neighbours, he himself was very, very poor. He cut his coats without waste; according to his embroidered cloth, they were very small ends and snippets that lay about upon the table—'Too narrow breadths for nought—except waistcoats for mice,' said the tailor."

This theme runs through the story. Though the tailor is very skilled and highly respected in his profession, he is still quite poor. His great luck is having been

selected to make an embroidered waistcoat for the mayor's wedding that is to take place on Christmas day in the morning. All is cut and fitted, ready for the assembly and the final work when the light fails and the tailor must go home to rest.

Upon arriving at his home, which in Potter's lush watercolor illustrations seems much too finely furnished and elegant for someone who lives in relative poverty even in 18th century Gloucester, he sends his cat Simpkin with his last fourpence to buy bread, milk, sausages, and a penny's worth of cherry-colored silk, required for the buttonholes of the bespoke vest. Simpkin sets forth on his errand, a willing and loyal servant though unspeaking in human terms, and in his absence the tailor discovers that the cat has been holding mice as prisoners under upturned cups on the sideboard. He releases the mice, who bow politely to him and vanish into their tiny holes in the wainscoting.

Upon Simpkin's return, he finds that his prisoners, who were slated to become his own supper, have been released. He turns against his master, and hides the crucial packet of silk twist in a teapot, though he delivers the supper things as we see in this scene:

"Not one mouse was left in the tailor's kitchen when Simpkin came back. He set down the pipkin of milk upon the dresser, and looked suspiciously at the tea-cups. He wanted his supper of little fat mouse!

"Simpkin," said the tailor, "where is my TWIST?"

"But Simpkin hid a little parcel privately in the tea-pot, and spit and growled at the tailor; and if Simpkin had been able to talk, he would have asked: 'Where is my MOUSE?'"

The tailor goes to bed, convinced that his career and fortune are ruined. Taken with a fever, he is unable to return to his work from Tuesday night until Saturday morning, the day when the waistcoat must be delivered.

Potter incorporates an old English folk tradition in the story, that says that all animals can speak for a time after the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve. Hungry and still seeking his mouse prisoners, Simpkin leaves the tailor in his bed and goes out into the streets, finding himself eventually at the door of the tailor's shop in Westgate. And there, just after midnight and before the dawn of Christmas day, he sees a tiny light within. Listening at the window and peeking into the shop, he sees the mice doing the tailor's sewing for him, finishing the mayor's waistcoat in time for the morning. They are singing and laughing at their work, and of course refuse to admit the cat. As they finish up, they all call out "No more twist, No more twist," for of course they have run out of thread just as the frugal tailor predicted.

Returning home, the cat finds that his master's fever has broken at last and he is

resting peacefully. He retrieves the hidden packet of red silk from the teapot, seized with remorse for his ill behavior, and when the tailor awakes on Christmas morning, Simpkin is attending him and the cherry-colored twist lies on his patchwork quilt.

The tailor laments that he is still so weak, and has not enough time to finish the waistcoat, but goes to his shop anyway. Simpkin accompanies him, but they find no mice in the shop. The waistcoat, however, is complete, or nearly so. Where the tailor left the cut out pieces on his table, it lies beautifully finished except for a single buttonhole, and where the buttonhole was to be made there is pinned a scrap of paper with tiny writing on it that says “No more twist.” Potter’s conclusion is inevitable:

“And from then began the luck of the Tailor of Gloucester; he grew quite stout, and he grew quite rich. He made the most wonderful waistcoats for all the rich merchants of Gloucester, and for all the fine gentlemen of the country round.

“Never were seen such ruffles, or such embroidered cuffs and lappets! But his buttonholes were the greatest triumph of all. The stitches of those buttonholes were so neat—*so* neat—I wonder how they could be stitched by an old man in spectacles, with crooked old fingers, and a tailor’s thimble.

“The stitches of those buttonholes were so small—*so* small—they looked as if they had been made by little mice!”

Potter unquestionably wrote with children in mind, yet we can easily see that her language and vocabulary was not watered down for them. Perhaps because of her own isolated and unusual childhood, she assumed that all children were as precocious as she herself had been. Certainly the complex moral issues of *The Tailor of Gloucester* probably escape most young children, though they are nonetheless enchanted by the lavish illustrations and the Christmas gift elements of the story.

Simpkin’s reform, told so simply at the climax of the tale, is the element that I find most interesting. We do not hear that he lives happily ever after, though we know his master does so. We do not hear that he never after that ate anything but bread and milk, or that he befriended mice in need and brought them packets of oatmeal. Yet his change of heart is clear, even though his pursuit of mice as food is not entirely painted as villainy. His great error, which he eventually redeems, is the withholding of the buttonhole twist from his master who is in need of it.

Potter herself never gave up her love of all creatures large and small. At age 47, and in defiance of her parents’ wishes, she married William Heelis, whom they considered to be a “common solicitor.” She went to live with him and keep house for him, finding that cooking and cleaning with her own hands was quite different

from managing a house full of servants who must do the actual tasks. However, she did learn those skills, and in due time, with inheritance from her family and her husband, she was a wealthy widow who owned over 4000 acres of land in the Lake District. On her death in 1943, being childless, she willed the bulk of her estate to the National Trust, and her land is now protected as a historic park and preserve for both the native species and farm animals of the region.

Since furry fandom is intimately associated with art, perhaps even moreso than with literature, I cannot commend Beatrix Potter's works highly enough. If you are not familiar with them, hunt them up. Most public libraries will have them, and they are all still in print. You will want to make sure you have the original, unaltered text and illustrations, though, as many of these books have been adapted and simplified, with supposedly modern illustrations and language that lack the enchantment of the originals. Potter illustrated her stories with her own watercolors, at a time when children's book publishers did not skimp on the illustration process so they were reproduced lavishly. The detail of these miniature paintings is, in a word, exquisite. Most are drawn from life, making use of scenes around the village of Sawrey, where Potter lived, and careful anatomical study of the small animals she loved so much. Her characters are not cartoons by any stretch of the imagination, and they rarely assume postures that would be impossible for the animal they depict, though some might be rather uncommon or unlikely.

That brings me to the conclusion of this week's discussion. It also brings me to an end, for a while, of discussing Victorian and Edwardian British authors. The next few installments will address works more contemporary to us, including a number that are certainly not written for children. Thanks for listening, and let me once more encourage you to contribute your thoughts and suggestions. You can send your e-mail to [altivo at livejournal dot com](mailto:altivo@livejournal.com). Until next time then, good reading to all.

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